SPELLING PRONUNCIATION ERRORS AMONG STUDENTS IN

THE UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

In most African countries where English is used as a second language, spelling-pronunciation errors have continued to rear its ugly head. Students in Nigerian universities are not free from such errors. By adopting a descriptive survey research method and the error-analysis tool of applied linguistics in language teaching, this paper investigates the spelling-pronunciation errors of students in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It is observed from the findings of the paper that a greater percentage of the spelling-pronunciation errors discovered in students' speech are not based on mother-tongue interference; rather, they are based on graphological irregularities prevalent in the English language (i.e., based on the lack of one-to-one correspondence between the English letters of the alphabet and the phonetic symbols). These errors inhibit effective communication and draw the second-language learners backwards in attaining a native-like competence in the target language. The paper, therefore, recommends that second-language learners be exposed to adequate auditory as well as articulatory experience in the classroom teaching with various teaching facilities like tape-recorder, radio, etc; at an early stage in the learners' careers.

KEYWORDS: Error, Error Analysis, Spelling, Pronunciation Error, Mother Tongue, First Language, Target Language

INTRODUCTION

A second language (L2), which is the language learnt after one has acquired one's first language (L1), is usually characterized by errors, especially during the learning process. Despite the persistent efforts of the learners during this learning process, most learners of a second language commit errors and often times do not attain native-like proficiency in the target language (TL). Richards and Schmidt (2010) posit that error is only observed in the learning of L2 and foreign language (FL). In other words, a native speaker does not commit errors in his/her first language. 'Error', according to their definition, is the use of a linguistic element, which could be a word, grammatical item, speech, or showing incomplete learning. According to Corder (1967), errors arise from inaccurate learning, inaccurate teaching, wrong guessing, poor memory, the influence of the mother tongue and the process of learning. Error analysis, therefore, does not forbid errors in the cause of L2 teaching and learning. Errors are seen as a significant tool in the teaching process. However, errors inhibit communication and the essence of language teaching is to give the learner a native-like ability in his use of the L2 or FL. So, when the learner produces linguistic elements that are viewed by a native speaker as faulty or that which shows incomplete learning of the TL, the learner has not appropriately communicated. In order to see that the learners attain a proper level of communication in the TL, learners' errors are properly investigated in the different aspects of the TL in order to improve the learner's full mastery of the TL.

In this paper, therefore, the spelling-pronunciation errors are focused on. By spelling-pronunciation error we mean the errors in students' pronunciation which can be traced ultimately to spelling (graphology), as well as to the peculiar relations between the written medium and the spoken medium in English. This paper apart from the above stated objective

also has the aim of showcasing, on the basis of empirical data to be adduced later, that for the normal learner at school, efficient performance in the speech habits presupposes efficient performance in the written medium. The paper also confirms Abercrombie's assertion that the proper mastery of the two media (spoken and written) is the backbone to learning the language itself. This is because the two media have not been got under proper control as early as possible in the career of many of our students and have, therefore, not receded into the background and become automatic and unconscious; they continue to manifest, sometimes rather embarrassedly, in the students' performances in the TL. The paper also investigates the relevance of the first-language interference (if any) in these spelling – pronunciation errors in an L2 situation such as what are obtainable in the Nigerian universities, with the University of Nigeria as the focal point.

The paper is divided into six sections. The present section, which is the introduction, provides the background to the study. Section two explores the concept of error analysis. In section three, the methodology adopted in the paper for data collection and analysis is presented. Section four of the paper looks at data presentation and analysis while section five x-rays the implication of the spelling-pronunciation errors in language teaching and learning. Finally, in section six, the researcher provides some recommendations and concludes the paper.

ERROR ANALYSIS: AN OVERVIEW

Error according to Richards and Schmidt (2010:201) is an area of study in applied linguistics that studies and analyses the errors made by second language learners. Richards, Palatt, and Weber (1985) define 'error' as the use of a linguistic item (example, a word, a grammatical item, a speech act, etc) in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning. In his own definition of 'error', Anasiudu (1983:172) says that "error refers to the systematic deviance of the learner from which we are able to determine his current knowledge of the target language." This corresponds to Norrish's (1987) definition of 'error' as systematic deviation when a learner has not learnt something and consistently gets it wrong. Based on the above definitions of 'error', therefore, we can say that error is the flawed side of learners' speech or writing, i.e., those parts of conversation or composition that deviate from some selected norms of mature language performance irrespective of the characteristic or cause of the deviation.

On the other hand, error analysis (EA) is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners commit. Error analysis came in the 1960s as an alternative to contrastive analysis (CA) to show that most of the errors that second-language learners commit are not due to the learners' mother tongue interference but reflect universal learning strategies. However, it made heyday according to Haded (2011) in the 1970s. Bussman (1996:155) says that "error analysis studies the types and causes of linguistic errors." This definition of EA is in consonance with Corder's (1967) definition of EA. Corder is regarded as the father of EA. It was with his article entitled the Significance of *Learner Error*, published in (1967), that EA took a new turn. Maicus, Maicus and López (1999) call this 'Error as Progress.' But before then, error used to be flaws that needed to be eradicated. Corder presents a completely different point of view of EA. He argues that errors are important in themselves. According to Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982:140), since the appearance of S.P. Corder's initial argument for the significance of learners' errors, in 'The Winter' (1967) issue of the *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, "Researchers and applied linguists in numerous countries have spent valuable time extracting errors from students' essays and conversations, submitting them to close scrutiny, and using them as a base for theory construction and classroom practice." They went further to say that the instance of widespread appeal of EA stemmed perhaps from the refreshing alternative it provided to the then prevailing but more restrictive contrastive analysis approach to errors. EA, according to Nada (2003), works by compiling a corpus of the L2 learners' deviations or errors from the norms of the TL. After studying these deviations, it classifies them by their types, and hypothesizes possible sources of the errors identified. In other words, the model of analysis includes the following three stages:

- Data collection - recognition idiosyncrasy

- Description: accounting for idiosyncratic dialect

- Explanation: (the ultimate objective of EA)

Against this backdrop, Dulay et al (1982:141) contend that the EA movement can be characterized as an attempt to account for learners' errors that could be explained or predicted by CA or behaviorist theory, and to bring the field of applied linguistics into step with current climate of theoretical opinion. In this respect, EA has been most successful. It has brought the multiple origins of learners' errors to our attention. It has also succeeded in elevating the status of errors from that of a complete undesirability to the relatively special status of research project, curriculum guide, and indicator of learning stage.

EA, according to its proponent, Corder, S.P, distinguishes between three types of errors viz interlingual, intralingual and developmental errors. Interlingual errors are errors due to the negative influence of the native language (NL). They are interlingual because the learners' L1 habit (patterns, system or rules) interfere with, or prevent the learner to some extent from acquiring; the patterns and rules of the L2 (see Corder 1971:147). On the other hand, intralingual errors are those errors due to the complexity of the language being learnt (TL), independent of the native language, (Corder 1971). Richards (1971:6) says that they are "items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. Consequently, developmental errors, according to Richards (1974:174), illustrate the learners' attempt to build up hypothesis about the TL. In this situation, therefore, the learner tries to 'derive the rule behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypothesis that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the TL.

Many scholars, namely Selinker (1794), Richard (1974), and Corder (1984) among others, have in one way or the other reviewed what they consider as the causes or sources of errors in language learning to include: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, overgeneralization of TL linguistics materials, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and semantic errors such as building false concepts/systems among others. But the scope of error analysis in this paper covers only the intralingual errors (i.e., these errors that are committed by learners because of the nature of the TL itself).

From the above overview, we can say that language learners unavoidably commit errors in their attempt to master their target language. And a systematic analysis of errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching, (Corder 1974). Also, the above overview shows that errors are not only as a result of transfer (interlingual errors) as CA posits, but also as a result of the complexity of the TL itself - intralingual and developmental errors.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a descriptive survey method which involves identifying and predicting variables as applicable in observed language behaviour of the students in actual classroom context. The population of the study was the linguistics and Igbo students from the Department of Linguistics, Igbo and Other Nigerian Languages, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu state. The sampling technique was used to select representative units of the entire population from where the researcher gathered his data. In order to do this, the linguistics and Igbo students were clustered along the four classes (first, second, third and final-year classes) in the department for easy study. Five students were selected randomly from each class giving a total number of twenty students. Each of the students, whether male or female, was given an

error-provoking passage to read in a classroom lecture situation on different occasions from where the corpus of this analysis was gathered. Karra (2006) asserts that error provoking exercises are usually administered to enable the students commit as many errors as possible which in the long run will help the language teacher in analyzing and understanding the students' errors and also use the understanding to improve language competence, obtain information in common difficulties in language learning as an aid in teaching. In the error-provoking passages, the interest of the researcher was in their pronunciation of the written word in the passages to see signs of spelling-pronunciation errors. Their reading was tape-recorded and transcribed afterwards. Based on the working procedure provided by Corder (1971) for the analysis of learners' errors (which includes recognition, description and explanation), the data were analysed. Specifically, after the transcription, the researcher identified and selected the spelling-pronunciation errors. Then, he described them by classifying them into different categories. Finally, the errors were calculated, weighed and presented.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Below are the samples of the spelling-pronunciation errors which have been elicited from the students' tape-recorded reading. We have also listed the standard usage violated immediately below each one. This is because we believe that the context will make clear what item was intended in each use.

1. a. *The school Choir /ʧ①eℐ⅍/ performed

    b. The School Choir /kwaɪə/ performed…

2. a. *…there was chaos /ʧe①s/ in the school compound

    b. there was chaos /ke⅍①s/ in the school compound

3. a. *But rather he bought a ewe lamb /ewe la:mb/

    b. But rather he bought a ewe lamb /eℐu: læm/

4. a. *Will you answer the question /kest⅍①n/ shouted his father angrily

    b. Will you answer the question /kwesʧ★n/ shouted his father angrily

5. a. *…and you cease to be my son /s①n/

    b. …and you cease to be my son /s⅌n/

6. a. *but often /①f♦ʊn/ times, the boy's doctor /d①kt①/ refused to listen /l⅍st⅍n/

    b. but often /①fn/ times, the boy's doctor /d①kt★/ refused to listen /l⅍sn/

7. a. *Everybody stood in awe /⅍:we/…

    b. Everybody stood in awe /❷:/ …

8. a. *You are a fiend /fi:ɪend/ he shouted /♦a⛨ted/

    b. You are a fiend /fi:nd/ he shouted /♦a⛨tɪd/

9. a. *… when the mother /m①d⅍:/ threw the /d⅍/ maize flour /fl❷:/ on him

    b. …when the mother /m⅌⅋★/ threw the /⅋★/ maize flour /fla⛨★/ on him

10. a. *…woman, you better look and listen /luk ✈nd l⅍st⅍n/ shouted the husband

b. …woman, you better look and listen /lʊk ★n lɪsn/ shouted the husband

11. a. *The young poor /jɒŋɔ p❷:/ lecturer…

b. The young poor /jʌŋ pʊ★/ lecturer….

12. a. *…it was really an ado about nothing /an ᵃdo abaʊt nɒtɪn/

b. …it was really an ado about nothing /ən ədu: əbaʊt nʌθɪŋ/

13. a. *Mr Ojo tried, … but his ire /ɪre/ was much /wɒs mɒtə/

b. Mr Ojo tried, … but his ire /aɪə/ was much /wəz mʌtə/

14. a. *The room was full, but /ful bɒt/ Emeka tried to squeeze himself in

b. The room was full, but /fʊl bət/ Emeka tried to squeeze himself in

15. a. *…I came in here legally /legᵃ:li:/ he retorted /rɪtɒ:ted/

b. …I came in here legally /li:g★lɪ/ he retorted /rɪt❷:tɪd/

16. a. *The hotel suite /sjut/ was empty

b. The hotel suite /swi:t/ was empty

17. a. *It was the worst thing /w❷:s tɪn/ that ever happened to him

b. It was the worst thing /wɜ:s θɪŋ/ that ever happened to him

18. a. *…in a red Peugeot /pidʒot/ car with the University plumber /plɒmba/

b. …in a red Peugeot /pɜ:Ɡ★ʊ/ car with the university plumber /plʌmə/

19. a.* The vehicle /vehɪkl/ was already in motion

b. The vehicle /vi:ɪkl/ was already in motion

20. a. *In the university chalet /tələet/…the air conditioner…

b. In the university chalet /ə✈leɪ/…the air conditioner…

21. a. *In the mean time, he started recounting the Lord is my shepherd /ʃefᵃ:d/

b. In the mean time, he started recounting the lord is my shepherd /ʃep★d/

22. a. *He then left for their estate /estet/

b. He then left for their estate /ɪsteɪt/

23. a. *…which happened when he was an heir /ᵃn he★/ to the family

b. …which happened when he was an heir /★n e★/ to the family

24. a. *…Mr Ojo went towards the mosque /mɒski/ some hours /haʊs/ later.

b. …Mr Ojo went towards the mosque /mɒsk/ some hours /aʊ★z/ later.

25. a.*… later went to the university tomb /tomb/

b. …later went to the university tomb /ˈtu:m/

From classroom experience of reading exercises carried out on students with the above error items, the following sub-categorization of the spelling-pronunciation errors listed above were arrived at. The above errors can be classified broadly into:

- Errors possibly due to false spelling transfer in relation to the pronunciation.

- Errors probably traceable to the phenomenon of lack of one to one correspondence between the letters of the alphabet and the phonetic symbols.

- Errors possibly due to lack of the knowledge stress, improper application of stress or inability to decipher the classes of words to stress and when to stress them.

ERRORS POSSIBLY DUE TO FALSE SPELLING TRANSFER IN RELATION TO THE PRONUNCIATION

The English language features a great number of words with the same pronunciation known as homophones, which constitute a serious confusion for foreigners pronouncing written English. From the data presented, we have the following:

Flour in (9a-b) above, instead of pronouncing /flaʊə★/, the student says /fl❷:/-(floor); taking the spelling -**our,** which is realized in some English words like pour, source, four, etc as /❷:/. Having formed this wrong paradigm, the student mispronounces 'flour' as 'floor'. The same thing happens in (16 a-b), where **suite** /swi:t/ is pronounced as /sju:t /. Unaware of the fact that 'sweet' is not the only English word with the pronunciation /swi:t/, the student erroneously transfers the false spelling in his pronunciation. These examples and several others in the manuscript, which are not here for lack of space, are traceable to homophony and other instances of wrong graphological analogy in students' pronunciation of the written English. The implication of this error is obvious, especially in an L2 situation like Nigeria. It is certainly too cumbersome to expect learners to master all these correspondences through general reading practices, which most of the students do not do on any appreciable scale.

Again, students confuse many words in the written form during pronunciation. They frequently mistake a word they have seen with another which has a close similarity in acoustic effect. Of course, in pronouncing such words, they pronounce what they think they have been hearing and not actually what is written on the paper. The confusion is probably due to inaccurate listening which appears to be confused by the fact that relevant items are correctly written when presented in isolation to the same students who have earlier confused them in pronunciation. These same students often go on to repeat the errors in their next pronunciation exercises.

ERRORS PROBABLY TRACEABLE TO THE PHENOMENON OF LACK OF ONE-TO-ONE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE LETTERS OF THE ALPHABET AND THE PHONETIC SYMBOLS

Before discussing the point, it will be pertinent to present the letters of the alphabet for both the English and Igbo languages; since the students used for the study are Igbos studying linguistics and Igbo in the department.

The English and Igbo Orthography

According to Okorji and Okeke (2009:27), "a set of letters used in writing a language is called alphabet."

English Alphabet

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N

O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Igbo Alphabet

A B CH D E F G GB GH GW H I Ị

J K KP KW L M N Ñ NW NY O

Ọ P R S SH T U Ụ V W Y Z

A look at the above letters of the alphabet shows that the Igbo language has more letters than those of the English language. Also, according to Gimson (1978) on the issue of redundant letters in English, he says that "our present day spelling of English is highly sophisticated; it is a separate expression of the language with its own rules and conventions." Furthermore, Gimson posits, "...core written form of English is therefore an imperfect representation of the phoneme elements of the spoken language; yet, it can be reasonably argued that there need not necessarily be a strict and complete correspondence between the sound patterns of speech and the usual patterns of writing." The problem of lack of correspondence between the orthographic symbols and the phonetic symbols in English is manifested in one English phoneme relating with different letters. Therefore, a sound segment or letter in English may relate with different letters or phonemes and a letter or sequence of letters can also relate to only one phoneme. Example:

26. /i: / = pol**i**ce /pli:s/

    = m**ee**t /mi:t/

    = S**ea**t /si:t/

    = p**eo**ple /pi:pl/

    = am**oe**ba /★mi:b★/

27. /k/ = a**cc**ount /★ka✝nt/

    = **ch**aos /keɪ①s/

    = bo**x** /b①ks/

    = **c**ome /k⌁m/

    = mos**que** /m①sk/

    = **q**uiche /ki:♦/

28. /e/ = L**ei**pzig /la🖐pz🖐ɣɔ/ = /aɪ/

    = l**e**gal /li:gl/ = /i:/

    = ir**e** /a🖐★ / = /★/

    = **E**nglish /🖐♜ɣɔl🖐♦/ = /🖐/

    = g**e**nre /ℂ①r★/ = /①/

    = x**e**rography/z🖐★r①ɣɔr★f🖐/ = /🖐★/

In example (26), the speech sound /i:/ relates with different letters of the alphabet (i, ee, ea, eo, oe), while example (27) shows the different letters (cc, ch, x, c, q) which can be used to represent a single consonant /k/. Example (28) shows different phonemes /aɪ, i:, ★, ✍, ①/ that relate with one letter 'e'. This supports Egbe's (1979:94) claim that "there is no one-to-one correspondence between the way sounds are separated in the written form and the way they are said in a speech event in the English language." This second category of spelling-pronunciation errors observed in the students' tape-recorded reading are as a result of lack of one-to-one correspondence of the English letters and phonetic symbols. Thus, the mispronunciation of words in the data presented above, from (1a&b - 7a&b and 11a&b - 25a&b), are as a result of the above factor. Since many Nigerians (and in this study Igbos) are apt to pronounce English words as they are spelt, it is inevitable that such cases of sound weakening, sound dropping, or syllable amplification, and sound length will be followed. This is in line with Babatunde's (1975:55) observation that "…a large proportion of errors made by Nigerians are bad pronunciation because of the nature of the written English." This situation is also likely to be the case with other areas where English is used as a L2. Therefore, any facile assumption, on the part of the student, of a spelling-pronunciation fit in the language is bound to result into lexical conflicts. Therefore, the student, who is impatient with the irregularity in spelling-pronunciation correspondences in English, decides to pronounce the words the way he reads them.

Some spelling-pronunciation errors also exist, which are created by the initial orthographic 'h' in English and the ignorance of the fact that some letters of the English alphabet are silent during pronunciation as in examples (3, 6,10, 18, 19, 20, 23 24 and 25). Here, there is practically no clue as to when the 'h' or other silent speech sounds should be pronounced and when it should not; or when to pronounce these silent letters and when not to. A wrong pronunciation of it results in ineffective communication. This confusion about the pronunciation of initial orthographic 'h' is probably responsible for the unusual addition of an initial /h/ to words that normally contain an initial vowel, see example (23a and b). So, a look at examples (24) */ha♱s/ instead of /a♱★s/, (25) */tomb/ instead of /tu:m/ among others, points to the fact that many learners find it difficult to know when a letter is silent, and as such should not be pronounced.

ERRORS POSSIBLY DUE TO LACK OF THE KNOWLEDGE STRESS, IMPROPER APPLICATION OF STRESS OR INABILITY TO DECIPHER THE CLASSES OF WORDS TO STRESS AND WHEN TO STRESS THEM

Stress is a supra-segmental feature. According to Lyons (1981:84), suprasegmentals mean the super imposition of features on the segmental. English as well as Igbo has supra-segmentals. However, while stress and intonation are the supra-segmentals in English, it is more commonly accepted that tone is the only supra-segmental in Igbo. Considering this, English is described as stress-timed and Igbo syllable-timed. Lack of the knowledge of the operation of stress in English is, therefore, another main reason why students commit spelling-pronunciation errors. In isolation, functional words like: articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, etc, are stressed, but in construction they lose their stress and take their weak forms.

The result of this is longer length of time in pronouncing English words and the use of the strong forms of some English vowels where the vowels' weak forms are suppose to be used. Observe examples (3, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 21, and 23). In these examples, we will observe the use of strong forms of some vowels where their weak forms are supposed to be used; leading to spelling-pronunciation errors.

Note that 'poor' in example (11) is not wrong pronunciation but a case of having different variations of pronouncing for the same word.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE SPELLING-PRONUNCIATION ERRORS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Having explored the spelling-pronunciation errors of students in the University of Nigeria, it is evident that each of the errors listed leads to one kind of aberration or the other on the lexical grammatical plane. In other words, we have listed mainly those errors which result in recognizable but wrongly chosen items in pronunciation due to lack of correspondence between the letters and the speech sounds. So, any L2 teacher making use of such items for teaching would eventually have to separate them for treatment according to their grammatical implications. But they are first listed as spelling-pronunciation problems to draw attention to the fact that the main problem concerns the two media of the language, the written and the spoken media and their relations, which have not been properly mastered as a preliminary to learning the language (English) itself. In as much as engaging in the debate of whether writing or speech is basic, it is important to remind us that the basis of language study hinges on the phonological level of linguistic analysis. In other words, the orthographic symbols represent not formal items but phonological ones. That is one important reason why the written aspect of the English language is a problem for L2 learners; since her graphology is highly irregular, and as such, crop up in the learners' pronunciation. Most scholars have maintained that the pronunciation errors in students' speech can be traced ultimately to wrong operations on the graphological level. Based on the foregoing discussion, we can ascertain that a considerable deal of students' speech problems can be diagnosed through an analysis of the written pattern of the TL (English).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the paper, the researcher recommends that it will probably yield good results if the student is made aware, through intensive practice, of the fact that some English orthographic forms can often be realized with same phonic material. Students should also be given opportunities for practice in using context clues to select appropriate signals to represent relevant items from words that are homophonic in nature. Ideally, this acquaintance and practice should be had as early as possible in the learners' carrier. But in a situation whereby for one reason to the other it is not done or was improperly done at the initial stage. And there is evidence that the improper teaching or learning is adversely affecting the learners' pronunciation; corrective measures must be put in place immediately to put the students through; because it is obvious that the knowledge of the writing system and pattern of a language is quite useful to achieve correct pronunciation

Again, providing an adequate auditory as well as articulatory experience in classroom teaching is also important in curbing these errors, (Babatunde 1975:55). In a situation whereby the teacher cannot provide that experience himself, he could take advantage of the various language teaching/learning facilities such as tape-recorders, radio, etc which are usually within the reach of many universities today. One of the best but expensive assets a university could have for the teaching of English as an L2 is a language laboratory. Therefore, the institution, department or the university alumnus can provide such facilities to the institution.

With particular regard to the partial evidence provided in this paper because of its nature, it will not be wrong to say that a considerable deal of our students' pronunciation problems can be identified through an analysis of the graphological analog of English. Furthermore, it has to be realized that the efficiency can be better assured by inculcating efficient speech habit in our students; otherwise, much of the time spent correcting pronunciation errors maybe time wasted. Having explored the spelling-pronunciation errors of student whose major cause from the result of our investigation is graphological irregularities of the TL (English), it becomes necessary that language teachers/lecturers

should emphasize the practical teaching where the student should be exposed to correct pronunciation. Again the teachers/lectures should be effective in their command of the language (English) in such a way that they can provide the learners with a good model.

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